



# AN ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES RESPONSE TO CORONAVIRUS

## An Open Letter

We greet you in solidarity as scholars, educators, and activists who have dedicated our lives' work to uncovering the intersections and “intra-actions” of human life with environments of all kinds, and with more-than-human species—vital matters indeed.

To do this work we have wholeheartedly shared our intellectual and economic resources. We have taken time away from family and friends, recreation and community, to give to our calling of raising environmental awareness, appreciation, and eco-defense. We have spent our own hard-earned funds.

And now a virus carries the message<sup>1</sup>: without an advanced degree, without a prestigious tenure-track appointment, without a single publication or life of its own, the coronavirus has exposed our interbeing.

And more: it has pulled back the veil of smog and car exhaust, the spewing fumes of airplanes and automobiles. It has linked the intersections of deforestation, urbanization, and industrialization with the crowding of wild species into compressed spaces, increasing the likelihood of human-wildlife contact and virus transmissions.<sup>2</sup> It has uncovered a world more freed—for now—of industrialism, of probing and extracting and dumping.

Without the incessant travel of the world's wealthiest tenth, who consume 187 times more fuel than the poorest tenth, the skies are clear over Los Angeles, New Delhi, Northern Italy, and Ahvaz.<sup>3</sup> The Himalayan peaks are visible from Punjab, India, for the first time in 30 years.<sup>4</sup> Since the 1987 report on “Toxic Waste and Race,” it's been well known that poor communities, and communities of color, predominantly live in areas of greatest air pollution.<sup>5</sup>

Now, Harvard researchers have discovered that air pollution – especially the tiny pollutants known as PM<sub>2.5</sub> --significantly (by 15%) increases the chances of contracting and dying from COVID-19.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Adele Peters, “[What would happen if the world reacted to climate change like it's reacting to the coronavirus?](#)” *Fast Company*, March 10, 2020; Dan Gearino, “[Coronavirus ‘Really not the way you want to decrease emissions.’](#)” *Inside Climate News*, March 11, 2020; Brad Plumer and John Schwartz. “[Where the Virus and Climate Intersect.](#)” *The New York Times*. March 18, 2020.

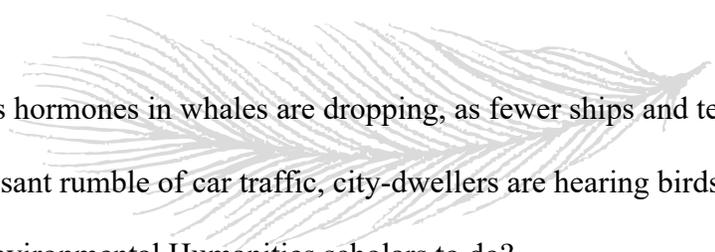
<sup>2</sup> See David Quammen. “[We Made the Coronavirus Epidemic: It May have Started with a Bat in a Cave, but Human Activity Set it Loose.](#)” *New York Times*, January 29, 2020; Sonia Shah, “Think Exotic Animals are the Blame for the Coronavirus? Think Again,” *The Nation*, February 19, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Roger Harrabin, “[Climate Change: The Rich are to Blame, International Study Finds](#)” *BBC Environmental Analysis*, March 16, 2020. Harrabin's article is based on Yannick Oswald, Anne Owen, and Julia K. Steinberger, “Large inequality in international and intranational energy footprints between income groups and across consumption categories.” *Nature Energy* 5, 231-239 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41560-020-0579-8>

<sup>4</sup> Bob Picheta, “[People in India Can See the Himalayas for ‘the first time in decades.’](#)” *CNN News*, 9 April 2020.

<sup>5</sup> See the [United Church of Christ report](#), as well as the [American Lung Society](#) for researched evidence.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Beth Gardiner, “[Pollution made COVID-19 worse. Now, lockdowns are clearing the air.](#)” *National Geographic*, April 8, 2020. The Harvard research is under peer-review at the *New England Journal of Medicine*. See Xiao Wu, et al., “Exposure to air pollution and Covid-19 mortality in the United States,” <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.04.05.20054502v1>



Meanwhile, stress hormones in whales are dropping, as fewer ships and tests resound undersea.

Without the incessant rumble of car traffic, city-dwellers are hearing birdsongs all day.

What's left for Environmental Humanities scholars to do?

Let's throw in our environmental scholarship and practice to sustain this reprieve from climate change, and work for structural transformation, starting with ourselves: let's commit to *limit flying*. To *limit our driving*. To schedule meetings and conferences on the internet. To eat ethically, ecologically, and locally sourced foods.

First, let's start by saying it to ourselves, and to one another. We commit to limit flying. To limit driving. To eating ethically and ecologically. We recommit ourselves to working for social justice, equity, and democracy, both within the human family and in multispecies forms, particularly since the pandemic has and will continue to hit vulnerable and marginalized populations the hardest and will likely end up reinforcing existing hierarchies.<sup>7</sup>

Only after this recommitment are we inviting our peers, our students, our families and friends to join in this collective Environmental Humanities commitment to slowing climate change with our very life practices—an action wholly congruent with efforts for larger social and structural change.

*Limit your flying.* If your articles, presentations, classes, arts and activism mean what you say, this is the moment to show it.

*Review your diet.* The lives and deaths of “food” animals in China and the U.S. are instrumentalized for human carnivory, variously brutal in their confinements and slaughter—the finger points back at us, if we fund these deathly diets. And there are more ecological choices.

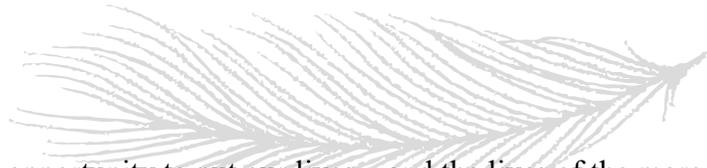
We've had the data for decades—from the United Nations' report on *Livestock's Long Shadow* (2006), to Marco Springmann's co-authored research on the health and climate change benefits of plant-based diets (PNAS 2016), or the numerous articles from *The Guardian*, and even Paul Hawken's *Drawdown*, which lists plant-rich diets and reduced food waste as the top #3 & #4 of 100 solutions to climate change.<sup>8</sup>

No one listed the Coronavirus in those solutions to climate change. But it's working to slow human travels—at too high a cost. And it has opened up a moment for larger social transformations, for better or worse.

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<sup>7</sup> John Eligon, Audra D. S. Burch, Dionne Searcey and Richard A. Oppel Jr. “[Black Americans Face Alarming Rates of Coronavirus in Some States.](#)” *The New York Times*. April 7, 2020; Ibram X. Kendi, “[What the Racial Data Show: The Pandemic Seems to be Hitting People of Color the Hardest.](#)” *The Atlantic*. April 6, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, *Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental issues and options* (Rome 2006); Marco Springmann, et al., “Analysis and evaluation of the climate change cobenefits of dietary change,” *PNAS* April 12, 2016 113 (15) 4146-4151 ( <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1523119113> ); Damien Carrington, “[Huge reduction in ‘meat’-eating essential to avoid climate breakdown.](#)” *The Guardian*, 10 October 2018; Paul Hawken, ed., *Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reduce Global Warming* (Penguin Books, 2017).



COVID-19 is our opportunity to put our lives—and the lives of the more-than-human world--beside our scholarship. While we continue to work for long-term cultural and economic changes, we recognize “*the personal is the political*”—and we commit to limit flying, to limit driving, and to review our dietary practices.

We recommit to using our profession to work for social justice, equity, and democracy, both within the human family and in multispecies forms. Join us!

Signed,

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